

ART. XXXI.—*Abstract of a Paper on Aboriginal Art in Australasia, Polynesia, and Oceanica, and its Decay.*
By MR. PAIN.

[Read 11th September, 1871.]

Mr. Pain commenced his paper by stating that his attention had been directed to the subject, about to be considered, for many years past; he referred to its present general interest, and to the increased importance which it would acquire at a future date, when the aboriginal races shall have passed away, and when their works, treasured in museums, shall have become records of a condition of things no longer existing on the face of the globe.

It was pointed out that these primitive people and their works formed an interesting chapter, an essential link in the history of the human race. The rapid decay of the native arts was also viewed from a sympathetic point of view, regretting that such simple and beautiful specimens of the skill of nature's children, at present attainable if due effort were made, should so soon pass beyond recovery.

The comprehensive nature of the subject was urged, and as the limits of time available for the present paper precluded its consideration in detail, it was proposed that a few of the many otherwise available facts be received as examples of the whole.

Mr. Pain stated that, with the object of rendering his paper as interesting as possible, he had selected from his ethnological collection, some of those rare and beautiful objects of aboriginal handicraft, pertaining to Australasia, Polynesia, and Oceanica*; and that he trusted their exhibition would have a stimulating effect; that they would prove the means of creating a desire to collect, while there is yet opportunity, such specimens of the works of these peoples as are unique in character; unique, because although still obtainable, they are not now reproduced as formerly. They are not reproduced in the same number, or in the same degree of tasteful elaborate ornamentation.

The asserted decline of native art is attributable chiefly to the social change to which these people are subject, "a change by some styled civilization; a process

* These were arranged round the room at the Society's Hall, in which Mr. Pain's paper was read.

by which they become indoctrinated in many of the most odious and degrading vices of Europeans, and by which they at the same time lose the beautiful simplicity of aboriginal character and much of the ingenuity which has hitherto distinguished them as workmen."

Further detailed reasons for this decline were advanced. It was argued that the better class of workmen or experts fall most readily into the habits and customs of Europeans; that they are the readiest, under the new conditions, to change and to abandon their primitive notions of ornamentation. The pre-eminent imitative faculty disposes the individual possessor of this power to procure and imitate the novelties introduced by the whites. The more inquiring minds of these highly-skilled natives are most susceptible of distraction, and their attention when once courted by new objects and European styles of ornament becomes thenceforth diverted from the original course. The old characteristic styles of work are left for execution by the less expert, but also less changeful native artizan.

Mr. Pain proceeded to state the fact that ever since the advent of Europeans among them, these natives have ceased to work as of old. Their best efforts have given place to such rude and trashy specimens (now produced expressly for barter), as appear worthless when compared with older and genuine examples.

"If we examine one of the early art-productions of the Fijians or New Zealanders—a carved weapon for instance, we shall find the work to consist wholly of an ingenious massing of ornament: the composition beautiful; the outline truthful; the detail elaborate; the finish exquisite. With Nature as their guide and director, and their powers of design being restricted, they have acquired a skill, almost hereditary, enabling them to carry out these designs with a degree of precision and nicety of workmanship seldom surpassed in even the more civilized parts of the globe. Indeed, some of their works of a century past would, at the present day, bear favourable comparison with the finest specimens of European art."

The distinguishing characters of the ornamental works of these different families are thus referred to:—

"I will now refer to the typical characters of their ornamental styles. The feature distinguishing between the works of the Fijian and the New Zealander is one in which

they are diametrically opposed to each other. The Fijian usually adopts an angular style of ornament; the New Zealander generally employing a convoluted design. These people are equally opposed in their respective manners of making fabrics for articles of clothing, &c., the Fijian being far behind the New Zealander in this respect. This you will see to be fully proved by the specimens which I have this evening placed before you. The New Zealander excels in the latter point, but, on the other hand, I would also point out the advantage possessed by the Fijian in the manufacture of pottery; an art which seems to be almost unknown to the New Zealander. Throughout these woven and fictile manufactures they each adhere to their peculiar designs, and to distinguishing features of ornamentation."

"It matters not upon whatever work these people are engaged, whether in the construction of their houses, the building of their canoes, in the making of their weapons, or their ornaments for personal wear, each invariably adheres to a style which is one of the distinguishing peculiarities of the race. This practice is studiously borne out, and belongs to the majority of the races inhabiting the South Pacific Islands. Again, closer distinguishing features may be detected in the works of the various tribes comprising the different races; each tribe strictly adhering to some special design of its own; usually some characteristic carving on the end of their weapons of war; some adopting a convex, others a concave form, either with or without ornament; others affect a flat or square surface, so that it requires a long acquaintance with their works to be enabled to class them."

Frequently I have observed specimens obtained from one locality or race of people which have obviously been produced in other islands. This occurrence may be easily accounted for, by the fact of sea-faring men bartering them, and even by the barter which these different native people effect, at times, among themselves."

Mr. Pain shows that errors originating from causes of the kind alluded to have been promulgated in works of an otherwise reliable character.

"In further illustration of these views I may refer to Owen Jones' beautiful and elaborate grammar of ornament. Its first three pages are devoted to illustrations of aboriginal art, and are copied from specimens in the United Service

Museum. Among these illustrations I find several specimens wrongly described. One specimen certainly characteristic of the natives of Tahiti is attributed to the New Zealander. Another specimen, strictly New Zealandic in character, cannot be placed at all, although very little knowledge of style would enable any one to identify it with its producers."

Native Wood Carving.—"The New Zealander proceeds thus: A block of wood is procured and rudely fashioned to the required size and shape; it is then saturated with any oily or fatty substance at command. The block is then carefully smoked over a fire, then again oiled, and again smoked, and so on, until its outer surfaces are rendered vulnerable to the very primitive tools at command of the native artizan, namely, fragments of flint, obsidian, shell or their celebrated green stone (jade or axestone), by means of which their ideas are realized by a kind of etching, or, more properly speaking, a system of scratching and scraping."

"Another peculiarity belonging to the work of these people is that they perfect their designs in the mind prior to the commencement of any portion of the execution. When the design has been thus created, a portion only of the work is carried into execution by scratching out only so much as it is calculated can be completed within a given time. The workman trusts to his truly wondrous memory which carries him faithfully through to the finish, without misapplying a line, and this though many of their works are of such extent as to occupy years for completion."

The Comparative Skill of the Different Groups.—"My reason for selecting the aboriginals of the Fijian and the New Zealand groups as examples, is on account of the universal opinion which places them foremost in the ranks of ingenious and clever native workmen; because, indeed, they have no rivals among the inhabitants of the Southern Archipelago. I ought, however, to add that many clever tribes still exist among the Tongans, the Tannaese (?), the Samoans, the inhabitants of Tahiti, and the New Hebrides group; among the whole of whom the same rapid decline of constructive and decorative art is perceptible, and their case is identical in this respect with that of the Fijian and the New Zealander."

The Native Arts of Samoa.—"The natives of Samoa to a great extent still hold their own in that peculiar class of

work for which they have been from our first knowledge of them, remarkable, namely, in the building of canoes. The old double war canoe of these people, as it was built generations back (a model of which, executed by them, I now produce), was throughout of such excellence as would do credit to a civilized people. Alas! these have now departed, making way for the single canoe and outrigger, which although decidedly a decadence must yet be considered a creditable performance.

Their canoes range from 20 to 40 feet in length, and they are seldom more than three feet in width, which necessitates an outrigger. They are rudely fashioned from the body of a tree, and are attached by two poles in a way similar to that formerly employed for the double canoes. These canoes are in many instances lavishly ornamented with shells and mother-of-pearl, yet never display any such beautiful traced or carved ornament as those emanating from the Fijian or the New Zealander. When the French navigator, Bougainville, visited this group of islands in 1768, he was struck with the large fleet of canoes with which his vessel was immediately surrounded; and hence he designated them "the Navigators;" Samoa being the *native* name of the group."

New Caledonia. — If we compare the works of the natives of New Caledonia with those produced by the Samoans, we shall find that the two styles are almost identical, excepting the particular item of canoe building. In each case the manufactures are of an useful and substantial character, the most esteemed weapons of war being in many cases totally destitute of ornament. Neither of these races possesses high ability in ornamentation. A slight advantage may be justly awarded to the New Caledonian for his production of a rude kind of pottery; it is, however, of such an inferior kind as to be in no respect comparable to the fine and most useful fictile works of the Fijian."

Mr. Pain having instanced his views by the examples above given, and having pointed to the Fijian and New Zealander as the most energetic and skilful of these aboriginal races, contrasts them with the Australian and Tasmanian natives, whom he characterizes as the most indolent, and as occupying the lowest grade of intelligence, and especially of constructive ability, of all these races; so low, indeed, as to show scarcely sufficient capacity or skill

for making even a slight covering for themselves. The Tasmanian he places even lower than the Australian, producing absolutely nothing beyond one or two primitive weapons. Regret is expressed concerning the Tasmanian, for the small interest generally manifested towards collecting such relics as could have been recently, and such as might yet be obtained for preservation in museums; and especially as one last remaining female survivor is all that now remains of this once relatively numerous people. Allusion is made to the deceased king Billy, who was the last male of the Tasmanian native race, and to the unseemly proceedings attending his demise; and two highly typical and accurate life-size busts of Wanroddy, and Treginney his wife (parents of King Billy), were exhibited in illustration of remarks concerning the mode in which the Tasmanian native was made to retreat before the footsteps of the white man. It was stated how Wanroddy and Treginney became instruments towards this end, decoying their own people and betraying them into the hands of the Government authorities, and how a small pension was the reward for this base service. Mr. Pain explained further how the whole residual Tasmanian race, thus handed over, was shipped off and concentrated in Flinder's Island, and how, thus localized, they have rapidly diminished and are now in the last act of dying out, leaving the scantiest vestiges in evidence of their career.

Mr. Pain's paper concluded with a few hints concerning a scheme for collecting and preserving a museum of high class native art, which he proposed should be attached to this Society; concerning which proposition it may be remarked that there is at least one other institution in Melbourne in which such a collection has been already commenced, and moreover that the acquisition and care of an ethnological art-series is certainly at present beyond the scope of this Society's business.
